

PRESENTING INFORMATION TO THE SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL*
– Ten Tips on Communicating in a Crowded Information Environment –

1. Respect that the Councilmembers are the decision-makers. You are providing professional advice or information from your personal experience. But yours is only one important perspective the Councilmember(s) must consider. The highest quality decisions occur if you are open and forthcoming with information and respectful of the elected officials' need to balance many interests in a highly pluralistic society.
2. The best way to win the support of a Councilmember is through his or her personal staff. Take the time to explain your issue fully to a Councilmember's legislative aide. The aides are professional, smart, have the Councilmember's ear, and have more time than the Councilmember to learn about your issue.
3. Tailor your remarks to the audience. All Councilmembers are different in terms of interests and learning styles. The best way to learn how to present information to a Councilmember is to ask his or her personal staff. Does the Councilmember prefer oral presentations or written remarks? Short? Long? In advance? Graphs? Numbers? Then think in terms of engaging someone's interest in important information, not providing a lecture.
4. Maintain a balance between two competing concerns: Councilmembers are truly short on time, but also want to be prepared and not taken by surprise. Some questions to ask yourself include whether the Councilmember needs to be briefed on this issue, whether it needs to be today, whether a memo or staff briefing would suffice. When you are requesting a meeting or that an item be placed on a committee calendar, do not mislead about the importance of an issue. Best bet: explain the situation to the Councilmember's legislative aide and jointly decide how best to approach the issue.
5. No written document should be over two pages. If it must be longer, provide an executive summary of no more than two pages. There are NO exceptions to this rule. Avoid long paragraphs.
6. In general, Councilmembers like visual information: charts, tables and graphs. This information will get you and the Councilmember in trouble if it is not thoroughly labeled and with clear attributions of sources for facts. Again, check with the legislative aide: a Councilmember may not like graphs and strongly prefer logical paragraphs or brief, factual outlines and lots of numbers.
7. Never speak for more than 5 minutes. If the Council wants you to speak for longer than that, they will ask you questions. Think about (up to) three things you want the Council to remember, and state them clearly, early and with emphasis. It's fine to stop early and ask for questions, but your total time should be no more than five minutes.
8. Assume the Councilmembers know nothing on the subject about which you are presenting information, even if you briefed the same committee on the same subject the previous week. There are dozens of topics on the Councilmembers' plates at any one time. Help them out with brief reiterations before moving on to further explication. Even so, stay under five minutes!
9. Never read a written document aloud word-for-word to Councilmembers. Instead, tell them the things they need to know to make a quality decision. Since your argument is boiled down to two pages, and you are speaking for under five minutes, this isn't so hard. Practice on a friend or colleague.
10. Don't worry if the Council interrupts you during a briefing. It means you've engaged interest and attention. Likewise, don't worry if a Councilmember interrupts you during a meeting in his/her office. If you have provided information in advance, the Councilmember may already have looked it over and can move on to his/her questions and concerns about what you are requesting or proposing. Relax. We're all in this together.

* Adapted from a speech by Councilmember Tom Weeks in 1991